

LINCOLN AND

THE LADIES

LINCOLN was a plain man. He was large and lean and awkward. His skin was sallow and leathery, his bones big and prominent. His face was lined and weathered. He had none of the graces of the courtly gentlemen. Yet compared with his, the chivalry of the Middle Ages was like watered milk and it may well be doubted if any man in history has been so beloved by women. I believe that if the women of the English-speaking world were voting for a favorite in the Hall of Fame, they would cast their ballots for this homely man.

He was nine years old when his mother died, in the little cabin on Pigeon Creek, in the backwoods of Indiana. Abe and his sister Sarah nursed her through that deadly fever called the milk sickness. She had been a good mother. It is likely that she spoke some very gentle and memorable words to her son in those last days.

It seems to have been in his view a sacred time. He never spoke of it, to my knowledge. A great sorrow becomes an immovable, living, silent Presence in the sensitive heart of a child of nine. Its sole occupation is that of throwing its shadow, which grows dimmer as the years pass. Those who knew him have told how that shadow lifted and fell on the face of Lincoln as long as he lived.

Those pathetic children lived alone in the cabin while their father went away to Kentucky. It must have been a sad place for them, in a wild and lonely land, so soon after their loss. It was a very wild country. The few pioneers who had penetrated that far had acquired a singular contempt for the refinements of civilization. I find a saying of one of them in my note-book which will be strange reading for the people of this time:

"I never see but one man die in a bed. God! It was kind o' cur'us."

After an absence of some weeks, Thomas Lincoln returned to his two children with his new wife, Sally Bush. It is said that his father was a shiftless man. All authorities agree that the boy had a hard time. In the *Indiana Magazine of History* one of his boyhood acquaintances presents this rude picture of Abe in those days:

"I noticed as Abe come out to where I wuz he hadn't but one shoe on an' I thinks to myself what's up with Abe, for I see he was a walkin' on the ball of his heel so's to hold his big toe, which wuz all tied up, above the snow-line."

I think there was no fondness in his recollection of those days. His love of learning had watered the desert of his youth. He spoke respectfully of his father and step-mother, but as soon as he had won his independence he kept away from them and, by and by, settled them on a remote farm in Coles County which he had bought. I think he went to see them only once.

When he came to live in New Salem—a young man of twenty-one—he knew little about women and it is probable that he had no high opinion of them. He was a slim, awkward young giant six feet four inches tall. No doubt some of them had ridiculed him, and there was no more sensitive spirit in the world. For a time, after he came there he boarded at the little cabin kept by James Rutledge.

SOME days "stylish-looking women," to use a phrase of his own, stopped there in passing. While they held the stage he kept out of sight, for it is likely that such ladies regarded him with curiosity and ill-concealed amusement. He hated, at first, to wait on ladies at Offert's store in which he worked. Naturally, in the course of that clerkship and of his social life in the cabin village he got "broke to women," as they used to say in that vicinity.

Certain of those women became his valued friends. Among them were Mrs. Bennet Able and Mrs. Jack Kelso. At the tavern he grew fond of Rutledge's daughter Ann, a slender, handsome, good-hearted girl, with blue



GUTZON BORGLUM'S
"LINCOLN,"
NEWARK, N. J.

Photo by Wide World Photo Service

BY IRVING BACHELLER

Author of "A Man for the Ages"

eyes and auburn hair. She was a skilled needleworker and Abe used to sit by her and watch her deft fingers as the needle flew. In his talk those days there was never any hint of the love he felt. He was no rival for the dashing young John McNeil and he knew it. He stood aside when the handsome young Irishman arrived and began to pay court to Ann. Not until McNeil had left and proved his unworthiness, and Ann was crushed by the long silence of her lover, did Abe speak out.

THEN followed one of the deepest emotions of his life when, with the great tenderness of his nature, he tried to heal a broken heart while his own was breaking in the hopeless task. Ann died, and a little before she died she sent for Abe. The great spirit of the young man had won her heart. For an hour or so they sat together alone. What passed between them no one has ever learned. But Abe told his friends that his heart had been buried in her grave.

For a long time he was inconsolable. It was thought that he had lost his reason. He wandered in the woods and fields alone, muttering to himself. But he was stronger than his grief. He returned to his work and his studies, "having cleared away the brush," as he put it. Among those simple folk were good friends who were glad to give him what help they could. In their company the strength of his soul came back to him. It was then that his native humor became a saving power in his life. He developed a faculty for story-telling and for the invention of picturesque phrases full of truth. He could imitate the droll characters he had met, to the delight of his friends. He wrote verses, mostly rather crude. He was a fun-lover.

But between his jokes and stories he had a habit of abstraction when the dark shadow fell upon his face and his thoughts seemed to be far away. Then, quite naturally, he fell into a sentimental adventure the like of which is not to be found in all history. His friend, Mrs. Bennet Able, had a sister down in Kentucky by the name of Mary Owens. Abe had met her, years before, and remembered that she was a comely girl. The young man's remarkable talents were known even in Beardstown and Springfield.

"I'll tell you what, Abe," said Mrs. Able. "If you'll agree to ask Mary to marry you, I'll invite her to come up here for a visit."

It was a merry jest. What kind of answer would one expect from Abe? The proposal had appealed to his love of fun and his sense of chivalry. He nobly agreed, unlearned as he was in the arts of women. Mary came. She was fat and toothless. She had acquired a very practical face. The joke began to look serious, especially as Mary had no humor to put in the game. She seemed

likely to suffer damage. With a smitten conscience Abe did his part like a gentleman. Then followed "a courtship to avoid marriage," as he put it.

A brief extract from a letter will present a sufficient history of the case. It was written to Mary, April 16, 1837. In it he says:

"I want in all cases to do right and most particularly so in all cases with women. I want at this particular time, more than anything else, to do right with you; and if I knew it would be doing right, as I rather suspect it would, to let you alone, I would do it. And for the purpose of making the matter as plain as possible, I now say that you can drop the subject and dismiss your thoughts from me forever without calling forth one accusing murmur from me. If it will add anything to your comfort and peace of mind to do so, it is my sincere wish that you should. Do not understand by this that I wish to cut your acquaintance. What I do wish is that our further acquaintance shall depend upon yourself."

Here was the effort of an honest and tender-hearted man to free himself from a dilemma shaped by

his unguarded good nature and by women who were willing to take advantage of it. It was likely that Mrs. Able was much at fault in the matter. Mary rudely flaunted him, whereupon he confessed to his friend, Browning, that he had got a conviction that the women were trying to hold him to that bargain.

As I have said, he had little understanding of women and his relations with them were mainly unhappy.

Mary Todd was of a proud and successful family in Lexington. When she came to Springfield, Abe was captivated by her brilliant talk and fine manners. He had become a power in the State of whom it was said that no honor was beyond his capacity, and Mary was ambitious. In a moment of enthusiasm he proposed to her and she accepted him.

Then he began to take careful thought of his hasty action. It occurred to him that, after all, he didn't love Mary and he was not a man with whom she could reasonably expect to be happy. His conscience troubled him so that he had no peace until he had written to Mary a letter in which he frankly confessed the doubts which had forced themselves upon him. This letter he read to his friend, Speed, who advised him not to send it, declaring, in effect, that such things should be said and not written. He said them in Mary's presence. She cried and that settled it. Abe took her in his arms and kissed her.

THEY were married within the year, if I remember rightly. She was high-spirited and rather quick and he lacked refinement. There is evidence that for a time they found it hard to get in pace with each other. Abe went lame, in a way of speaking. At first they lived at the Globe Tavern in Springfield, paying four dollars a week for board. Then they got a house. Mary found it hard to keep servants, being a bit hasty and exacting. It is said that Abe gave one faithful servant a dollar a week extra, on the sly, as "storm money." So it would seem that there were, now and then, storms in the house, as there are in most houses, I believe. He was indulgent in his home and never ruffled by the pranks of the children.

The social life of which they were a part was crude. In a musty file of the *Springfield Journal*, I found these notes of a fashionable wedding there in the early 50's:

"The bride's gown was of white English crape over a silk slip with baby waist. A sash of moiré ribbon was tied at the back. She had gloves and slippers to correspond. There were no flowers in the dining-room, it being December. The table was adorned with an immense white cake in the emblematic frosting—a molded figure of a veiled bride. On either end of the table was a tall pyramid of macaroons, bound by icing, over which a

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MEMORIES OF MY FATHER

good terms with its neighbors. Such an aversion had been stirred up by the Royalist and Clerical party against this Republican family of ours, with our democratic ideas, who had planted ourselves in the midst of Chouannerie country, that more than once I had seen the mistresses of neighboring castles ride past our driveway in their old-fashioned "berlins," and make a sign of the cross, not daring even to look at the house, which to them was literally the home of the devil.

My father, however, had friends in the small villages of the neighborhood whom he used to join at the opening of the hunting season, a solemnly celebrated occasion.

NOW and then the old castle of Aubraye was the scene of the most mysterious happenings. In the evening, immediately after dinner, my father would leave us, with the explanation that he had a sick man to visit far out in the country somewhere, so that he could not get back for our bedtime. That hateful ceremony always occurred at a fixed hour, and I knew there was no use trying to postpone it.

Accompanied by Aunt Sophie, who was all dressed for a long trip, my father went off, while I, completely fooled, joined my brother and sister who were playing at nurse's feet in the Treasure Tower.

Suddenly we heard a strange sound. We could scarcely believe our ears! It was a trumpet call, loud and nasal, incredible in such a place and at such a time, when the vast silence of evening was beginning to fall over the countryside.

My grandmother opened the door, and we saw before us a large screen, with our three little chairs lined up before it.

Suddenly a marvelous *Punch* in a gold-

stitched costume of rose-and-blue satin appeared above the screen. To the accompaniment of jokes and funny remarks that sent us off into gales of laughter, he announced that having been told that we had all been behaving nicely, he had come this evening to give us a wonderful entertainment.

The play began. *Punch* cut his usual capers, *Punch's* wife appeared in her thankless rôle, and the *Chief of Police* received his classic beating. Then came a distribution of candy and presents, and a Lilliputian display of fireworks, which ended the evening.

Dazed and mystified, I let myself be put to bed. I did not see behind the screen my father and my aunt, both as delighted as we, carefully putting away the silent puppets and their accessories, which only a few moments before a fantastic and humorous imagination had endowed with life. I would give a great deal to-day to possess the text of those first dramas written by the future author of the "Voile du Bonheur."

But they did not last long, those happy days, when the old house, drowsing among its century-old elms and chestnut-trees, woke to life under the spell of a vigorous young personality. Leave-taking followed all too quickly upon arrival.

To me that farewell meant black, dire calamity. I cried hopelessly for three days. I can still feel those hot, bitter tears on my cheeks. With my father gone, the whole place seemed to fall asleep again. Our life continued its monotonous way, with only an occasional infrequent disturbance at the news of an election, or one of those terrible duels that upset the entire house, or perhaps a copy of some important speech made in the Chamber. And this was only the beginning of the young deputy's career.

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SISTER SUE

He laughed lightly.

"But plans change, you know, when circumstances change. Surely, darling, you weren't thinking of making me spend the rest of my days in Gilmerville, were you?"

"You—you wouldn't want to then, even for—for a time?"

He laughed again lightly.

"I'm afraid not, my dear."

"But you liked it; you said you liked it."

"SO I did—for a visit." He frowned a bit impatiently. "But to live here is quite another matter. Why, Sue! I'd stifle here—starve—grow mad! As for thinking of writing here—impossible! I'm sure, dear, you

don't want to interfere with my career now."

"No, no. Of course not!" She spoke quickly, but her eyes were still troubled. "I was thinking of father, of course." She paused. The man said nothing. After a moment she went on, more slowly: "I'm afraid he won't be so contented anywhere else, and it's easier here, where he knows everybody and everybody knows him, to take care of him and keep him occupied."

"Of course, of course! I wouldn't think of moving him," said the man in cordial agreement.

"You—mean—you don't mean for us to go and leave him here?" Sue cried incredulously.

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web of spun sugar had been thrown. There were silver cake-baskets, from many households, holding gold, silver, marble and sponge cake intermingled with colored jelly. There were tall glasses filled with custards, and plates of candied fruits. In another room was a table loaded with cold ham, turkey, quail, pickles and hot coffee.

To Lincoln and his wife, those days, this was the superlative degree of elegance.

He was in the library of the State House when the telegram reached him announcing his nomination for the Presidency. He rose and said:

"I must go. There is a little woman down the street who will want to hear the news."

He carried his simple, homely habits to the White House. He lunched at noon on a glass of milk or a little fruit and dined between five and six. In the evening Tad used to sit in the office with him and often fall asleep there. His labors over, the President would shoulder the sleeping boy and carry him up-stairs to bed.

Once in a telegram to Mrs. Lincoln he said:

"Tell Tad the goats and father are well, especially the goats."

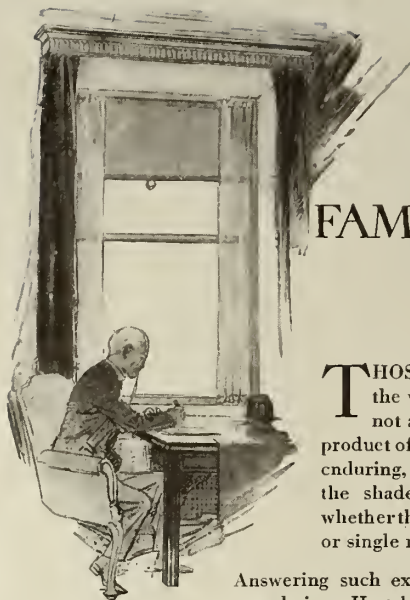
He never lost the playful spirit of his youth.

In a speech he once said: "I have never studied the art of paying compliments to women, but I must say that if what has been said by orators and poets in praise of women were applied to those of America it would not do them justice for their conduct during the war. I close by saying, 'God, bless the women of America.'"

Touching the rights of women, he once wrote: "I go for all sharing the privileges of the government who assist in bearing its burdens. Consequently, I go for admitting all whites to the right of suffrage who bear arms or pay taxes, by no means excluding women."

He could never resist a woman's plea for the life of a son or husband during the war. To Stanton he once said: "We have enough weeping widows in this country."

When I study his spirit I am reminded of a sentence in Lowell's essay on Dante: "He was a window for the light of truth and the splendor of God to shine through."



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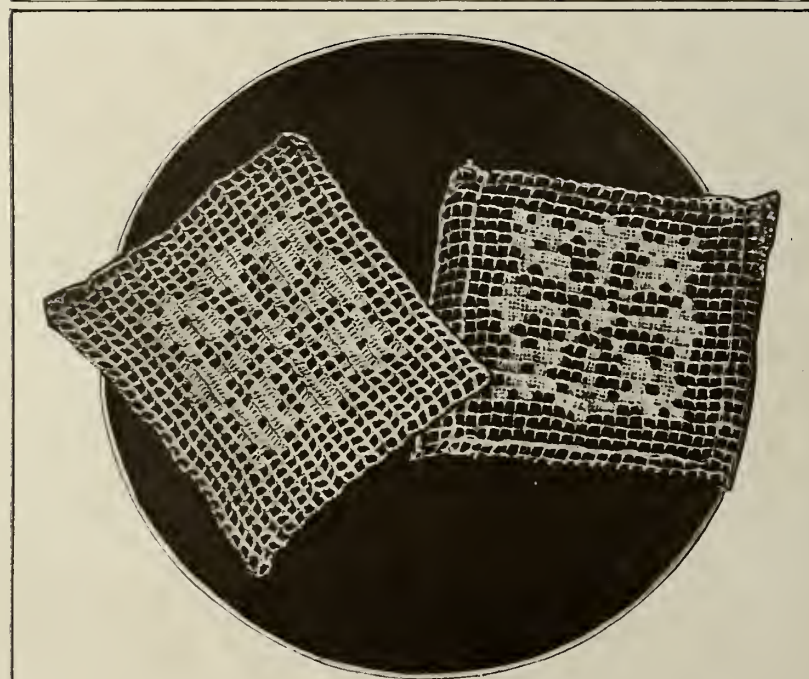
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